

Student Weather Reports in an EFL Class

Joseph Gondar

Good morning. Today is Monday, May 19, 1997. Here is today's weather report.

It was sunny all day yesterday. Yesterday's low temperature was 17 degrees and the high temperature was 25 degrees. It was a good day to take a walk in the park and look at spring flowers.

It was sunny when I woke up this morning and it 's sunny right now. However, it will probably become cloudy this afternoon . And it's going to be a little cooler than yesterday. The low temperature will be 16 degrees and the high temperature will be 22 degrees.

Thanks for listening.

If you had come into one of my intermediate-level Freshman English (FE) classes, you might have seen one of my students give a report like this one during the first few minutes of the 45-minute class period. This paper explains why I chose to use student weather reports as a daily introductory activity, how I prepared the student reporters for the project, what the student listeners were required to do during the report, and how I evaluated the performance of both speakers and listeners.

Teaching Long Transactional Turns

Brown and Yule (1983) explain the differences between two kinds of spoken language according to the function of each, and I explicitly teach both forms of communication in my FE classes. Language is interactional when its primary purpose is to maintain social relationships and transactional when its primary purpose is to transmit information. Of course, there may be some important information transmitted in a conversation which is primarily interactional, and even in a university lecture--an example of spoken English which is primarily transactional in nature--the professor may attempt to establish a personal relationship with the students.

Brown and Yule also classify spoken language by length. A *short turn* is spoken language which, because it is only one or two utterances long, does not require much structure. A *long turn*, on the other hand, can be as long as an hour or more, and requires much more structure. Descriptions, anecdotes, jokes, and explanations are examples of spoken speech typically done in long turns.

Weather reports, such as the ones I had my students present to the class, are an example of long transactional turns. One of the reasons I used them as a warm-up activity involved class management. As a whole-class speaking/listening activity weather reports served to focus the class and get the students to begin work. However, the major reason I selected this activity was because it worked well in teaching the students how to coherently transmit information in a relatively long block of utterances. Although giving an oral presentation to one's classmates is not usually perceived as a low-stress activity, I found that my students were quite capable of handling the level of communicative stress they experienced.

Communicative Stress

Speaking, even in one's native language, can be a very uncomfortable experience, and many of us have a hard time talking when we are under a great deal of communicative stress. Brown and Yule state that the context in which one speaks affects communicative stress. They say speaking is less stressful if the listeners are the speaker's peers rather than his or

her superiors, and it is less stressful to talk to one person rather than many. Finally, it is more comfortable when the environment is familiar and private rather than unfamiliar and public (p. 34).

A speaker's stress is also affected by the language ability of the audience and the information the audience already has. Having a listening audience composed of people who have less language ability than the speaker can be stressful for the speaker. In addition, a speaker's communicative stress is less when the speaker has information which is needed by the listeners. This is because in these situations the speaker is in control and the audience is motivated to listen attentively (p. 34).

Finally, the type of task affects the level of stress. According to Brown and Yule, a speaker is more likely to be comfortable when he or she is familiar with the information being transmitted and has control over the vocabulary required for the task. They also say it is more comfortable for the speaker when the information which is to be communicated "provides its own structure" (p. 34). Thus it is generally easier to recount a series of events than explain why those events happened. This is because recounting what happened in the past would ordinarily be done by talking about the earlier events before the later ones. The structure required for explaining why those events happened might not be as obvious, and would result in more communicative stress.

Brown and Yule state that a foreign language teacher should be aware of the factors which determine communicative stress and manipulate conditions according to the situation. For example, they suggest that teachers give the class a low stress exercise at the beginning of a course and ratchet up communicative stress thereafter.

Weather Reports and Communicative Stress

I analyzed my student weather report exercise with a checklist based on Brown and Yule's discussion of communicative stress. (A *yes* answer suggests low communicative stress for that factor.)

Is the listening audience the speaker's peers? Yes.

With the exception of the teacher, all listeners are peers of the speaker. Of course, one could argue that many students who are giving an oral report would ignore his or her peers and focus on the teacher who is grading the presentation. Because I think this argument has much validity, I took several measures to get the student speakers to view their classmates, and not me, as the primary audience. First, I sat in the back corner of the room so that I could not be easily seen by the speaker. Second, because I told the students that I would later give them an open notebook test on past weather reports, they tended to listen to the weather report fairly intently, pencils at the ready. So when a student weather reporter said, for example, *The high temperature will be 30 degrees...* he or she saw 20 classmates writing that information in their notebooks. I think that this might have helped the student reporter forget about the teacher who was sitting in the corner of the room.

Is the speaker speaking to one (as opposed to many)? No.

Speaking in front of 20 people, even in one's own language, can be a very stressful experience. However, I did not find the weather report activity to be beyond the capability of my students. Perhaps this is because, when all the factors related to communicative stress are considered, giving an oral report on the weather is relatively easy. I think that the most

powerful argument I have that my students were not overly stressed when they reported on the weather is the fact that, in the two years I had students do weather reports, all completed the assignment.

Is the environment familiar? Yes.

During both years of assigning weather reports, I waited for three or four weeks after the beginning of the school year before I started the activity. During that time, the students had plenty of time to become familiar with me and each other.

Does the audience know at least as much language as the speaker? Yes.

Asia University divides first year students according to their English language ability, and the student audience had approximately the same level of ability as the speaker.

Does the speaker have information which is needed by the listeners? Yes.

I asked the listeners to record the key information of the daily weather report so that they could later answer questions about the weather in an open notebook test. This gave the speaker informational control over the listeners and a motivated audience. The speaker had informational control over me as well because I had to record weather information if I intended to test the listening students at a later date.

Is the speaker familiar with the information transmitted and the vocabulary required to transmit the information? Yes.

I think it is safe to assume that Japanese university students have seen hundreds of television weather reports and know what kind of information they should transmit in a weather report. This information is easy for students to get before class and most gathered weather data from the morning news on television. In terms of the required English vocabulary, most of the weather words needed are high-frequency words, for example, *rain*. And when the weather conditions called for a word not in a student's active vocabulary, for example, *muggy*, students were able to handle it without much difficulty. All they had to do after consulting a dictionary was to write the word in the notes they were allowed to use during the report. This should have minimized the fear that they would forget an essential weather word. With regard to the grammar needed for weather reports, the basic sentence structures can be easily handled by even beginning students, and it is possible to report on the previous day's weather, the weather at the time of the report, and the weather for the rest of the day with only three verb tenses (simple past, present progressive, and *will or be going to* + infinitive form of the verb).

Does the information to be transmitted provide its own structure? Yes.

When one is asked to talk about yesterday's weather, the weather right now, and the weather for today, it is logical for most people to give the information in chronological order, a structure easy for my students to follow. In addition, a weather report is just a description of yesterday's weather and today's forecast, and opinions or explanations, transactional turns which do not necessarily provide their own structure, are not absolutely necessary.

This analysis suggests that my weather report activity had a relatively low amount of communicative stress and was therefore an appropriate speaking activity for the beginning of a course. The only factor which would suggest some degree of communicative stress relates to the size of the audience, and this prompted me to consider whether the activity could be improved by changing it to a small group presentation or a pair work activity. After careful consideration, there were several reasons why I did not reduce the size of the audience. First, I developed the activity partly because I wanted a warm-up exercise which could quickly focus the class. Having a single student make a report to the class helped me meet that objective. In addition, decreasing the size of the audience to reduce communicative stress may increase stress in other areas. For example, I already pointed out that it is more comfortable for the speaker when the speaker has informational control over the audience and when the audience is motivated to listen. I was able to give speakers a motivated and attentive audience by testing listeners on what they recorded in their notebooks. It would have been more difficult for me to give the speakers such an attentive audience if many different presentations were going on simultaneously.

Modeling Weather Reports and Reviewing Vocabulary and Grammar

Before the first student report, I modeled weather reports in four consecutive classes. After checking students' listening comprehension and their notetaking ability, I reviewed the sentence structures and vocabulary I had used in the model report and showed the class a few other structures and words I could have used. For example, I reviewed sentences such as these:

It rained yesterday.

It is raining now.

It is going to be rainy this afternoon.

The low temperature was 14 degrees and the high temperature was 20 degrees.

Temperatures ranged from 14 to 20 degrees.

Different weather conditions call for different reports, and I tried to add a few sentence structures every day. For example, to explain how to describe changes in the weather I wrote these kinds of sentences on the blackboard:

It is sunny now but it will rain this afternoon.

It became sunny in the afternoon.

It will cloud over this afternoon.

It will start to rain this evening.

It will continue to rain for the rest of the day.

Because weather reporters sometimes compare the weather of two days I also wrote a sentence like this one on the blackboard: *Today will be cooler than yesterday.* I also explained how to introduce uncertainty into the forecast with words such as *might* and *probably*.

When I prepared the students I did not try to anticipate all the sentence structures or weather terms a student might ever need in a weather report. I wanted the students to consider on their own which words, phrases and sentence structures were best for describing current weather conditions. In addition, I didn't provide the students with a script for a weather report because I didn't want speakers to insert current weather information into a boilerplate model.

Finally, on the day before the first student weather report, I wrote on the blackboard several ways a listener might ask for clarification:

Could you repeat today's weather forecast?
Sorry, I didn't catch yesterday's high temperature.
What did you say today's high temperature will be?

The weather reports I presented to the class always included a short comment on the weather, for example:

Today is a good day for playing soccer in the park.
I hate this kind of weather because it makes me feel blue.

I didn't require students to make these kinds of statements in their reports, but most of them included some sort of personal aside in their presentations. And in some of my classes, students seemed to view these personal statements as a way to get their classmates to laugh. For example, one student said in her weather report,

Today is a good day for drying clothes on the balcony.

After the report was over, I complimented her on the weather report and asked if she would wash clothes that day. She said she would not, and that she planned to go shopping after school. This prompted me to write on the blackboard,

Today is a good day for drying clothes BUT I'm going shopping.

Students must have found some humor in this sentence, because it was used several more times and always got a laugh when it was used. For example, another student in the class said,

Today is a good day for drying clothes BUT I'm going to play billiards.

I was happy to find that students were quick to add weather statistics which I had not modeled to the class. For example, perhaps because Japanese television weather reports include rain probabilities, my students added these statistics as well. In fact, in the two years I used my weather report activity, rain probabilities began to be included in student weather reports within the first week. When a rain probability was introduced by a student reporter, I reviewed the grammar and vocabulary after the report was given. Using the student reporter's data, I showed them sentences such as these:

There is an 80 percent chance of rain this afternoon.
The rain probability for this afternoon is 80 percent .

Different adjectives for describing weather were also gradually introduced by the student reporters themselves. For example, when I presented weather reports to the class at the end of April I did not use an adjective such as *muggy*. Later in the semester, though, the weather changed, and on the first hot and humid day of the year the weather reporters in each of my classes used an appropriate adjective. Students in two classes used *muggy*, one class

found out about the *sultry* weather we would have and a fourth reporter said it would be *hot and humid*. When new words were introduced in this way, I had the student reporter write the adjective they chose to use on the blackboard and added one or two synonyms.

Student Handouts and Forms

During the week leading up to the first student weather report, I gave the students a one page explanation of the weather report project. The handout explained what had to be included in the report, what kinds of notes were allowed to be used by the speaker, and the criteria I would use in evaluating their reports. The handout also addressed what the listening students were required to do during the oral presentation and how I would later test their listening comprehension. (See Appendix A).

The student handout explains the kind of notes a weather reporter is allowed to use when he or she is speaking. My goal was to get the students to speak in complete sentences without using a detailed script. At the same time, I felt that weather statistics and a few other words or phrases necessary for describing the weather should be available to the speaker during the weather report. In the first year I had students deliver weather reports to the class, I told the students what my goals were and instructed them to write only weather statistics and a few important phrases in their notes. I found these loose guidelines to be nearly unworkable. Some students wrote word-for-word scripts, and it was necessary for me to review each reporter's notes before the presentation. In the second year I used weather reports in the classroom, I found a better solution. Instead of relying on an explanation of what should and should not be included in a speaker's notes, I designed a form which had very limited spaces for recording temperatures and weather descriptions. I told the students that their notes could only be written on the front of the form and that they were not allowed to write outside the boxes. This made it much easier for me to monitor the nature and extent of a speaker's notes and forced the students to make their own decisions regarding the words and phrases which were most essential in their presentations.

During the week in which I presented sample weather reports to the class, I explained what the students had to do as listeners and note-takers. This year I had all the students buy *wordbooks*--spiral bound notebooks which have columns drawn on the pages for the students to record new vocabulary words--and I asked them to prepare several pages in the back for taking notes of weather reports. The first column was for the day and date, the second and third columns for the high and low temperatures, and the widest column for recording a summary description of the weather. Students used two lines of the page each day: the first line for the previous day's weather and the second line for the current day's forecast.

Evaluating Weather Reporters

The handout I gave the students explained how I graded student presentations. I kept the grading criteria simple so that students could concentrate on just a few things. Fifty percent of the grade was based on the student's delivery, and I told the students that they should concentrate on eye contact and volume. The other half of the grade was based on the content of the report. Reporters had to include the weather information I specified, speak in complete sentences, and use the correct verb tenses.

The most common error of student reporters related to eye contact. Although their notes had only a few words and phrases, many students kept their eyes on their notes when they spoke. Speaking in complete sentences was not much of a problem for my students, but about 20 percent of the presentations had more than one error with verb tenses. I found that, in general, reports became more error-free as we continued the activity. For example, students

who gave their reports during the last two weeks made fewer errors with verb tenses than those who delivered their reports in the first two weeks.

I used carbon paper in a notebook to summarize the weather reports and based a listening test on that information. As I was listening, I also wrote words, phrases or sentence structures I wanted to explain to the class as a whole or the student individually. Finally, when the report was over, I assigned a grade, wrote a short comment to the student, and gave the student reporter the carbon copy of my notes. This took a minimum of time, and I was able to begin the next class activity within a minute after the student reporter sat down.

Evaluating the Listeners

I read to the class three questions like the following in an open notebook test:

What was the high temperature on May 22nd?

What kind of weather did we have on Sunday, May 25th?

Which day was warmer, May 21st or May 14th?

I also had the students write a complete weather report for a day I selected, and graded it on both the accuracy of the report as well as grammar and spelling.

Conclusion

Having students report on the weather was very successful in my class and I highly recommend it to other teachers. I think that my students discovered that standing up in front of their classmates and giving a short, grammatically correct weather report with minimal notes was much easier than they thought it would be. I was then able to build on this success by having students practice other long transactional turns, for example, giving directions or telling a story.

In the two years I used this activity, the skill level of my students ranged from high-beginner to high-intermediate. Having students report on the weather was appropriate for this range of students, and weather reports could be used without modification for students with less language ability. In addition, I think this activity can be easily expanded for advanced classes by adding other elements to the report, for example, a *this day in history* item.

References

Brown, G. & Yule, G. (1983). *Teaching the spoken language: An approach based on the analysis of conversational English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Appendix A

Student Weather Reports

The first few minutes of each Freshman English class will begin with a **STUDENT WEATHER REPORT**. Each student will be assigned a day for his or her report. The weather report must include the following:

A description of yesterday's weather, including the high and low temperatures.

A description of this morning's weather and the weather right now.

A weather forecast for today, including the high and low temperatures.

Students who are not giving a weather report should take notes carefully. I suggest that you use the last few pages of your "wordbooks" to summarize the weather reports of each day. You will later be tested on your notetaking ability on an open notebook test.

I will report the weather to you during the next few classes. This is so you can practice taking notes and learn the words, phrases, and sentences commonly used in weather reports. Listen carefully and take notes on those days!

When you are the weather reporter for the day, it is a good idea for you to use notes to help you remember what to say. Only the form which I give you may be used for your notes! When you fill out your form, you may not write complete sentences, and you may not write outside the boxes or on the back of the form. I will give you more information on how to fill out the form in the next few days.

You will receive a grade on your weather report. Your grade will be based on the following:

1. Eye contact and volume. Look directly at your audience when you speak! Speak loudly so that students in the back row can hear you!
2. Content of the weather report and grammar. Give your classmates a complete weather report! Speak in complete sentences! Use the correct verbs!